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ABSTRACT

The paper, originally given at a 1986 Ethnic and Multicultural Symposium, describes the findings of a study of Black special education teachers and the factors influential in their selection and continued participation in the profession. The study surveyed 101 Black special education teachers in 64 Mississippi school districts. Subjects were among teachers identified as outstanding by district superintendents. District superintendents most often selected the teachers as outstanding based on their being role models for other teachers. Of the teachers nominated as outstanding 43% were Black. Most of the teachers were trained in predominantly Black institutions within Mississippi. The teachers were primarily female (94%), relatively young (60% between 30 and 39), and well educated (60% held a Master's Degree). Although teachers enjoyed their work and the people they worked with they were less happy with salary and opportunities for advancement. Tables detail the demographic and other data gathered by the survey. (DB)

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# What Attracts and Keeps Outstanding Black Special Education Teachers in the Profession?

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Generally speaking, America is facing a problem—an insufficient number of college students pursuing teacher education programs. More specifically, America is facing a crisis—a critical shortage of Black teachers. In emphasizing the need to improve and expand the pool of all future teachers, Graham (1987) states that the need to do so for Blacks is particularly acute.

Reporting in *NEA Today*, Weiss (1986) indicated that minority teachers are becoming an endangered species. The 12.5% representation they held in 1980 is expected to drop to less than 5% by the year 2000. Indeed, by 1986 the figure had dropped to 6.9% (Lytle, 1987). On the other hand, the minority student population is expected to show an increase from 27% to 33% during the years 1980 to 2000.

The concern over minority teachers is of such magnitude that two reports—*A Nation Prepared: Teachers for the 21st Century* (Carnegie Forum on Education and Economy, 1986) and *Tomorrow's Teachers* (Holmes Group, 1986)—made it a central issue. The Carnegie Forum report called for a policy to "mobilize the nation's resources to prepare minority youngsters for teaching careers" (p. 3). Points emphasized included (a) having schools provide and demand what is needed for success, (b) recruiting minorities into teaching, and (c) financially assisting predominately Black institutions of higher education to prepare students.

The Holmes Group report, in addressing the teacher shortage, noted that many of the most competent members of minorities have been attracted to careers in fields other than teaching. This is not good news for schools in view of the fact that expressive behaviors of children from minority cultures are routinely misinterpreted by incompetent, insensitive teachers. The report stated that "high-risk" children need teachers who can capitalize on the social context of the environment and use a variety of teaching strategies to enhance learning.

When viewing Blacks in particular, the magazine *JET* (Supply of Black Teachers, 1986) simply stated that the supply of Black teachers does not meet the demand. The shortage has reached such a level in Mississippi that the state superintendent of education will appoint a task force to pinpoint ways to recruit and retain Black teachers (Kanengiser, 1986). In Mississippi, Blacks constitute 35% of the public school teaching force (according to the Mississippi State Department of Education), but the percentage of Black students in public schools is 49.99%.

During the middle and late 1970s, special education witnessed tremendous enrollment growth. However, the area continued to suffer a shortage of personnel to staff classes across the nation. Lacking in particular were sufficient numbers of Blacks going into special

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education (and current trends reflect a steady decline). Further impeding an adequate supply of Black special education teachers (and Black teachers in general) are problems in meeting requirements for admission to teacher education programs and teacher certification. Other reasons often given for the shortage of Black teachers include (a) fewer minorities (proportionately) going to college, (b) fewer minorities choosing teaching as a career, mainly because of low salaries (Weiss, 1986), and (c) use of teacher competency tests which disqualify a disproportionate number of minority teachers.

Justifications for having sufficient Black teacher representation in the schools include (a) the need to have a staff which reflects our nation's racial and cultural heritage and (b) the need for good racial role models. Ways to overcome the shortage of Black teachers, as reported by a group of college deans of schools of education are (a) higher salaries, (b) stepped-up recruitment activities, (c) a more conducive teaching environment, and (d) public recognition of the contributions made by teachers (Kanengiser, 1986).

The importance of minority teachers in the schools is irrefutable. In achieving the goal, competence and larger numbers are major concerns. Existing literature on these concerns has often reported opinions of persons (e.g. college deans) other than Black classroom teachers. We initiated a field-based study to gather information on the concerns. An assumption was made that there are currently some *outstanding* Black special education teachers in the profession. It was believed that knowledge gained from a broad-based survey of these teachers would establish a basis for resolving the problems of competence and increased numbers.

## PURPOSE

The purpose of the study was to gain information from practicing outstanding Black special education teachers on what attracted them to the special education discipline and what keeps them there. The specific objective was to survey these teachers regarding factors in the areas of status information, training program, and job satisfaction. From this information, implications were formulated for recruiting and retaining more competent Black teachers to staff special education classes.

## METHOD

A comprehensive investigation by the authors of Black and nonBlack special education teachers in Mississippi is in progress. The present report is limited to the Black population.

### Instruments

Two instruments provided data for the study. The Outstanding Teachers in Special Education Selection Form was designed for use by school superintendents to select teachers in their school district. Measures taken to arrive at criteria for selecting outstanding special education teachers included (a) review of related literature on effective teaching (e.g., Code of Ethics and Standards for Professional Practice, 1983), (b) survey of practicing teachers in graduate programs, and (c) interviews (two in person and three by telephone) with five special educators, including a U.S. Department of Education project officer, university departmental chair, university professor, school district administrator, and a classroom teacher.

Information obtained was considered in developing the final form, which contained five selection criteria—student achievement track record, level of training and growth, role model in district, participation in organizations, and others. Explanatory information about the criteria was prepared to accompany the form. For example, explanations for student achievement track record were "The extent to which students under the teacher's supervision (a) manage daily living skills, (b) earn good grades, (c) score well on standardized tests, (d) make good social adjustment, and/or (e) do well in further schooling or employment. The type

and degree of exceptionality of the students should be considered in viewing their level of achievement."

The selection form was designed for the superintendents to enter the names and addresses of the selectees and to check the criterion/criteria used in making the selection. Other items on the form requested the name of the school district, preference for a copy of the research report, and return of the form in an enclosed self-addressed, stamped envelope. A statement of thanks for cooperation with the research effort was included on the form.

The Outstanding Teachers in Special Education Survey Form was designed for use with the teachers. It contained items about status information, family background, scholastic achievement/aptitude, training program, job performance, job satisfaction, and basic beliefs.

The present report reveals information on the areas of (a) status information—items soliciting information on personal attributes, degrees held, teaching experience, children taught, professional organization affiliations, and hobbies; (b) training program—information on factors regarding choosing special education as a career and the extent of appeal that selected training program components had for them based on a 5-level scale; and (c) job satisfaction—items reflecting various conditions of the teaching situation for respondents to indicate how true the conditions were for them based on a 5-point scale. Content of the items was based on a review of literature on teaching effectiveness (Gentry & Jefferson, 1986; Mercer & Mercer, 1985; Polloway, Payne, Patton, & Payne, 1985; Powell & Beard, 1984; Zumwalt, 1986) and other relevant materials (Code of Ethics, 1983; ARA Attitude Survey, 1966).

The items were arranged to make responding as easy as possible. A copy of the survey form was reviewed by the same group of special educators used in formulating the selection criteria form in terms of appropriateness of content and general structure of the instrument. Their input was used in finalizing the form.

### Subjects

The entire official list (167; however, clarification by telephone revealed 154 central districts plus one special district, thus N = 155) of school district superintendents in the state of Mississippi were asked to complete the Outstanding Teachers in Special Education Selection Form. All teachers (the 101 Blacks were separated for this report) designated by the superintendents or their designees were the subjects for completing the survey form.

### Procedures

The current list of Mississippi school district superintendents was obtained from the state superintendent's office. A letter was prepared requesting that district superintendents support research on effective teaching by designating on the selection form two to four outstanding special education teachers in their district. The letter also stated that the selectees would be congratulated for having been designated as outstanding for the purpose of the research and requested to complete and return a survey form. The letter, selection form, explanation sheet, and a self-addressed stamped envelope were mailed to each district superintendent during the period September 24 to October 1, 1986. Three follow-up letters (each time including another selection form and explanation sheet) were sent (October 31; December 9; January 21–30, 1987) to increase the number of replies. Each follow-up letter indicated the current number of respondents and further encouraged participation.

The designated outstanding teachers were congratulated in a letter and told of the researchers' desire to learn more about them to ascertain implications for recruiting and training more competent personnel to staff special education programs. They were encouraged to complete and return the enclosed survey form. A self-addressed stamped envelope was also enclosed. The first letters were mailed October 24, 1986, and the last of the three follow-up letters (each containing another survey form) was mailed May 19, 1987. Data received from the respondents were tabulated and analyzed.

## RESULTS

The number of district superintendents who participated in the study of outstanding special education teachers was 108 (70% of the 155). However, two did not submit names because no special education teachers in the districts were certified in the area. The 106 districts submitting names yielded a total of 320 possible subjects, of whom 236 (74%) completed and returned the survey form. Among the respondents were 101 (43%) identified on the form as Black. They were represented in 64 (60%) of the 106 school districts. Findings regarding this Black population are reported here.

The Black teachers selected as outstanding by the superintendents most frequently met the criterion of role model in the district (85%)—"Demonstrated ability and effort of the teacher in (a) executing his/her professional responsibilities associated with the job, (b) exemplifying interpersonal skills in working with parents and school personnel, and (c) achieving established goals and objectives in the school district." Two other criteria that often distinguished them were student achievement track record (79%) and level of training and growth (71%).

Table 1 contains detailed status data on the outstanding Black special education teachers in Mississippi. It reflects a primarily female (94%) group that is relatively young (60% between 30 and 39) and most often married (65%). Most were professionally trained in Mississippi (91%), often at historically Black colleges (65%), and many (60%) held the MS degree. They averaged 11.01 years teaching experience with most of that time spent teaching exceptional children (9.69 years) in the district of present employment (8.72 years). The children whom they most often taught were educationally handicapped (69%; EdH in Mississippi includes the mentally retarded, learning disabled, and mildly emotionally handicapped). They averaged about two (1.98) professional organization memberships and engaged in an average of about three (3.13) different hobbies.

Relative to coming into the special education field, more of the outstanding Black special education teachers were attracted to it after having received the bachelor's degree (36%) than at any other level of training. Two other points at which sizable numbers decided to teach special education were college freshman (21%) and high school (19%).

The major source of motivation for the group in choosing to teach special education was internal. Forty-seven percent of the teachers were self-motivated in selecting the teaching area. Some (13%) were influenced by encounter with a special education student. The others (40%) were swayed to join the profession by a number of different persons (e.g. principal, counselor, regular education teacher, or family member).

Once a serious look was given to special education, the desire to help exceptional children (56%) became the primary factor influencing the teachers to pursue the discipline. With others it was often desire coupled with opportunity for employment (14% as a single entity) or interest in the curriculum (4% as a single entity) that accounted for their going into special education.

Thirteen (13) key factors considered basic for a sound training program in special education were contained on the survey form to ascertain their appeal to the teachers (see Table 2). It was found that content of courses in the curriculum (87%) and student teaching and practicum experiences (81%) had the highest appeal. Other training factors that had high appeal were field trips and observation experiences (78%), the way teachers taught (77%), interaction with students and professionals (74%), and materials used in teaching (71%).

Factors having low appeal in the training program were student organization activities (combined low or less rating = 60%) and the way courses were scheduled (54%). Other factors that were not favorably viewed by the teachers were library resources (low or less rating = 39%), advisement by faculty (38%), opportunities for graduate studies (38%), research activities (37%), and seminars and conferences (36%).

Now that the teachers are in the schools, just how happy are they on the job? A review of responses on 24 job satisfaction indicators (see Table 3) shed light on the question. On the 5-point scale (5 and 4 = very true, 3 = true, 2 and 1 = not true), four items were rated as very true by 90% or more of the teachers. They were: successfully complete difficult assignments

TABLE 1

**Demographic Data on Outstanding Black Special Education Teachers**

| *Item* | *Number of Subjects* | *Mean* | *Percent* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Age–20–29 | 29 | - | .29 |
| 30–39 | 59 | - | .60 |
| Other | 11 | - | .11 |
| Sex–Female | 95 | - | .94 |
| Male | 6 | - | .06 |
| Marital Status–Married | 65 | - | .65 |
| Single | 29 | - | .29 |
| Other | 6 | - | .06 |
| Offspring | 98 | 1.62 | - |
| Advanced degrees held–M.S. | 58 | - | .60 |
| Ed.S. | 8 | - | .08 |
| Degrees earned in MS/other states | | | |
| B.S. | 88/9 | - | .91/.09 |
| M.S. | 58/4 | - | .94/.06 |
| Ed.S. | 6/2 | - | .75/.25 |
| Degrees from historically Black colleges | | | |
| B.S. | 72 | - | .75 |
| M.S. | 29 | - | .49 |
| Ed.D. | 7 | - | .88 |
| Years total teaching | 101 | 11.01 | - |
| Years teaching exceptional children | 101 | 9.69 | - |
| Years teaching in school district | 98 | 8.72 | - |
| Type children they teach | | | |
| Educationally handicapped | 69 | - | .69 |
| Learning disabled | 13 | - | .13 |
| Mentally retarded | 13 | - | .13 |
| Others | 5 | - | .05 |
| Grade level they teach | | | |
| Elementary | 35 | - | .36 |
| Combined (e.g., Jr., Sr. High) | 32 | - | .33 |
| Other | 30 | - | .31 |
| Professional organization affiliations | 95 | 1.98 | - |
| Hobbies | 99 | 3.13 | |

(93%), enjoy kind of work they do (93%), like people with whom they work (91%), and job is very interesting (90%). There were three items rated by a majority as not true. They were: feel satisfied with salary (70% not true), opportunities for advancement (63%), and salary is a good one (63%). Another item relatively not true was: progress toward promotion is satisfactory (42%).

## DISCUSSION

The study of outstanding Black special education teachers in Mississippi revealed some interesting findings. The criteria and number of Blacks selected was noteworthy. District

**TABLE 2**

**Appeal of Selected Program Training Factors to Outstanding Black Special Education Teachers**

| *Factors* | *Extent of Appeal (%)* | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | *No.* | *High* | *Low* | *No* | *Negatives* |
| Content of courses in curriculum | 98 | .87 | .12 | .01 | .00 |
| Way teachers taught | 100 | .77 | .18 | .05 | .00 |
| Materials used in teaching | 98 | .71 | .24 | .04 | .00 |
| Way courses were scheduled | 99 | .45 | .37 | .14 | .03 |
| Seminars, conferences | 100 | .64 | .29 | .06 | .01 |
| Field trips, observation | 100 | .78 | .14 | .07 | .01 |
| Organization activities | 96 | .41 | .40 | .20 | .00 |
| Student teaching, practicum | 96 | .81 | .10 | .07 | .01 |
| Advisement by faculty | 97 | .62 | .28 | .09 | .01 |
| Library resources | 100 | .61 | .32 | .07 | .00 |
| Interaction with students, professionals | 101 | .74 | .21 | .04 | .01 |
| Research activities | 101 | .63 | .28 | .07 | .02 |
| Opportunities for graduate studies | 100 | .62 | .25 | .12 | .01 |

superintendents most often selected the teachers based on their being role models for other teachers. As stated on the explanation sheet sent to superintendents, role model implies demonstrated ability and effort in executing professional responsibilities, exemplifying interpersonal skills, and achieving established goals and objectives. They were also well-recognized for student achievement track record. In the open nomination process of all special education teachers in the state, Blacks represented 43% of the respondents. Thus, the assumption that there are competent Black special education teachers in the field was confirmed by superintendents.

If the percentage of Blacks in special education approximates that of the general teaching population (35% Black), the 43% included here is a proportionately high figure. The finding speaks well for the ethnic group and the predominately Black colleges where most were trained. Support is also given to contents of the *A Nation Prepared* report (Carnegie Forum, 1986) and others calling for recruitment of minorities into teaching and for financial assistance to predominately Black institutions of higher education. The high frequency of Blacks among outstanding Black special education teachers suggests that increasing the number of Blacks in a school district may have a positive effect on quality instruction.

Another demographic feature of the Black teachers warranting attention is their tenure in the district. Though not happy with certain job conditions (salary and opportunity for advancement), they stay in the district in special education. Investment in training this caliber of teacher is considered wise.

If role model by ethnicity is important, representation by gender would also appear valuable. If so, the recruitment to special education of males capable of achieving the status of outstanding is desperately needed.

Ascertaining what attracts outstanding Black teachers to the profession began at the point of making the decision to teach special education. The fact that many made the decision after receiving the bachelor's degree suggests numerous speculations and raises many questions. For example, did lack of knowledge about special education training programs or lack of exposure to exceptional children delay the choice of field? While the knowledge and exposure

**TABLE 3**

**Selected Job Satisfaction Indicators: The Extent to Which They Are True for Outstanding Black Special Education Teachers**

| *Job Satisfaction Indicators* | *Number* | *How True (%)* | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| | | *5* | *4* | *3* | *2* | *1* |
| Feeling of worthwhile accomplishment | 101 | .55 | .31 | .13 | .00 | .01 |
| Complete difficult assignments | 101 | .54 | .39 | .07 | .00 | .00 |
| Considerable decision making power | 99 | .26 | .43 | .19 | .08 | .03 |
| Enjoy responsibility of the job | 100 | .58 | .29 | .10 | .03 | .00 |
| Enjoy kind of work you do | 101 | .71 | .22 | .05 | .01 | .00 |
| Job is very interesting | 100 | .69 | .21 | .09 | .00 | .01 |
| Receive praise for work | 101 | .45 | .29 | .13 | .08 | .06 |
| Are told you do a good job | 101 | .51 | .32 | .12 | .03 | .02 |
| Opportunities for advancement | 98 | .05 | .14 | .18 | .29 | .34 |
| Progress toward promotion is okay | 98 | .15 | .16 | .26 | .18 | .24 |
| Like people with whom you work | 99 | .64 | .27 | .07 | .00 | .02 |
| Considerable cooperation from coworkers | 99 | .51 | .27 | .17 | .00 | .05 |
| Have top-notch supervisor | 100 | .38 | .29 | .24 | .05 | .04 |
| Supervisor is a good one | 99 | .41 | .29 | .19 | .08 | .02 |
| Supervisor listens to suggestions | 99 | .48 | .32 | .13 | .03 | .03 |
| Feel supervisor and you understand each other | 100 | .56 | .28 | .07 | .04 | .05 |
| Feel satisfied with salary | 98 | .03 | .07 | .19 | .20 | .50 |
| Salary is a good one | 99 | .03 | .09 | .24 | .22 | .41 |
| Feel secure on job | 99 | .36 | .30 | .24 | .07 | .02 |
| System provides steady employment | 99 | .46 | .29 | .19 | .02 | .03 |
| Personnel policies and practices are good | 99 | .21 | .34 | .25 | .13 | .06 |
| Policies are well communicated | 99 | .22 | .31 | .26 | .13 | .07 |
| Physical surroundings are pleasant | 96 | .35 | .32 | .18 | .06 | .08 |
| Feel satisfied with working conditions | 99 | .33 | .23 | .23 | .09 | .11 |

elements are encouraged, the authors believe that the finding warrants further investigation in view of its implications for both recruitment and training.

Knowing that self-interest propelled many of the teachers toward special education is revealing, but this too is open in terms of implications for recruitment. Is there something in common about their background and character that could be profiled and used for more effective recruitment? On the other hand, we cannot help but wonder why special education school teachers (accounted for 3%) and college teachers (5%) were not perceived as influential persons. Perhaps the relatively recent development of special education as a discipline is a plausible answer for now, but if this finding persists, perhaps practicing teachers and teacher educators should be challenged to seek ways of effectively attracting persons to the field.

The overriding desire of the teachers to help exceptional children as a factor in choosing to teach special education is commendable in view of its possible benefit in enhancing learning. It may be applauded by educators. Equally as pleasing may be the finding that only a small number sought the field simply because of opportunities for employment (14%). The findings suggest that the teachers are truly committed to the education of exceptional children. Recruitment and training would benefit from an assessment of this interest or potential interest of prospective trainees in high school or as soon as possible.

There is considerable room for making special education teacher training more appealing. Even the items with the highest ratings could be improved. The factors listed on the survey form appear to be programmatically sound and could be made better with reasonable effort and resources. With knowledge of these findings it is hoped that universities will assess their status in these areas and respond accordingly.

The relative high level of job satisfaction achieved on a majority of items in the section reflects well on the status of the schools. Of the four areas (from a total of 24) where there is trouble, the two relative to salary come as no surprise. The findings on salary are in accord with what the literature has often reported (very low). The other two areas of concern dealt with opportunities for advancement. Ways to accommodate this need have reached various discussion levels but little known accomplishment has been made in this regard. We hasten to add that though the four problem areas are small in number, any one is reason for a large number of teachers to leave the profession.

In summary, this study has reflected on what attracts and keeps outstanding Black special education teachers in the profession. They were found to be attracted mainly because of self-discovered interest in the field and their desire to help exceptional children. They are kept in the field because of overall job satisfaction (tolerating low salary and limited chance for advancement) obtained from the employment setting. Major recommendations drawn from the findings for recruiting more competent Black teachers are (a) concentrate some effort at post-baccalaureate level, (b) expose prospective education majors to special education students, and (c) ascertain if prospects have a strong desire to help exceptional children. To retain competent teachers in the profession, salaries need to be raised and provisions made, perhaps through staff development and/or differentiated staffing, for teachers to experience professional advancement.

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